

PART III

*Chapter 34*

**Building Citizen-centred Policies  
and Services: A Global Snapshot**

by

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## Current state of play

Openness in decision making is now a declared goal for governments in many countries and public access to information is well established in OECD countries and beyond. Governments increasingly recognise that to meet the challenges of the 21st century access to information on its own is insufficient and that citizens need to be actively engaged in developing and delivering public policies and services.

To explore how best to build citizen-centred policies and services, over 80 public engagement government and civil society practitioners from 21 OECD countries and 12 OECD non-member countries, together with representatives of the European Commission and World Bank, met in Ljubljana from 26-27 June 2008. This International Workshop on “Building Citizen Centred Policies and Services” was co-organised by the OECD<sup>1</sup> and the Government of the Republic of Slovenia with the support of the World Bank’s Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP), DECIM, the European Citizen Advisory Service (ECAS) and Involve.<sup>2</sup>

## Benefits of public engagement are recognised...

There was a consensus that there are many benefits for governments in involving citizens in the design and delivery of policies and services and that public engagement is a key element of democratic governance.

Dr. Gregor Virant, Minister of Public Administration, Government of Slovenia, said in his opening speech that citizen consultation “is very practical for government. Much of the information is hidden from politicians – if you want to be well informed you have to ask those involved. It helps me see the possible conflicts and allows me to change or modify the proposal but also to have better arguments.” Others emphasised that engagement is a key element of democracy and accountability and is essential to build trust between citizens and governments that has been steadily declining in modern democracies.

Participants argued that engagement with citizens helps deliver more efficient and effective services by preventing wasteful or inappropriate policy and service delivery that may have to be re-done. In the case of complex policy issues (such as biotechnology), consultation may prevent public hysteria that then has to be countered. Examples were given of how citizens can help drive service innovation, which is essential in the context of doing more with dwindling resources or responding to rising expectations and growing needs due to demographic changes.

## ... but practice lags behind commitment

So there are many compelling reasons for governments to engage citizens. However, if the case is so strong why does practice seem to be lagging behind commitment? Certainly many examples of good practice were presented, but there was also a sense that declared

public commitment was not necessarily translating into ongoing and sustainable change in day-to-day governance and service practice. A number of obstacles were highlighted:

- Moving beyond “lip service” or declarations of intent to actual implementation.
- Identifying legitimate structural or organisational obstacles and “sticking points” (e.g. organisational accountability, democratic representation, administrative culture).
- Expecting change to be linear and straightforward. Public engagement needs to be understood as a journey which will be continually evolving and will be uncertain, often feel messy and will require experimentation, culture change and ongoing dialogue.

## Today’s challenges

A number of challenges were identified which need to be addressed if citizen engagement is to become part of everyday practice for governments. Participants also identified examples of how countries are rising to these challenges.

### 1. Political buy in

There was consensus that this can be difficult as politicians can be fearful of losing power or of upsetting carefully developed plans and may be uncertain about the value of engagement.

However, the large scale community engagement in New Orleans since the floods, undertaken by AmericaSpeaks, demonstrated how a major consultative process can be linked to politicians, and integrated into strategic planning. The design principle of “being linked to decision makers” is enshrined as a fundamental principle in all citizen consultations carried out by AmericaSpeaks. Minister Virant, when talking about Slovenia’s success in promoting administrative simplification, also stressed the importance of politicians being open to citizen input.

### 2. Resources

Engagement cannot be undertaken without planning and resources and too often insufficient thought is given to resource allocation which can lead to tokenistic activity and lack of capacity to follow up. In short, successful citizen engagement follows proper resource planning. We heard about examples in New Zealand from Toi te Taiao, the Bioethics Council, of clear budgeting for public deliberation on complex and sensitive issues relating to bio-technology. We also heard about the City of Port Phillip (Australia), and how significant public engagement was planned and funded as part of the strategic planning process for the city. In a time of declining public resources, it is particularly important to plan strategically for consultation and public engagement, rather than fund separate one-off projects, and to integrate this into the longer term budget planning process.

### 3. Skills

To effectively and efficiently involve citizens requires new skills. A number of participants identified that training and capacity building are needed for officials to learn how to work in new ways – to listen, be open to new ideas and be flexible. These same skills were also highlighted as key to successful innovation, by projects in the UK undertaken by Young Foundation and the Innovation Unit. To make information understandable, for example so that citizens can engage in debates about budgeting, requires new ways of

analysing and presenting information. The region of Lazio (Italy), in its participatory budgeting programme, re-analysed its budget information to make it comprehensible so that citizens could make proposals about resource allocation. It was agreed that civil society also needs to develop its own skills to be a partner in the process of citizen engagement and in particular to be a potential link with particular communities or interest groups as well as with the citizens in general.

#### 4. Scale and depth

The workshop participants identified the challenge of reaching sufficient numbers of citizens to achieve representative engagement and also to get beneath the surface of one-off views to explore issues in greater depth and understand how views can be debated and changed through deliberation. Participants highlighted the importance of using a range of techniques as part of a planned and systematic approach, drawing on quantitative and qualitative methods.

Countries reported rising interest in and increasing use of new technology including participatory web (Web 2.0) tools, and the workshop heard about innovative online campaigns in the lead up to elections in France and the USA which mobilised people who had not been previously involved and created self-activating communities of interest. Using such tools can achieve good value for money because they draw on existing infrastructures and networks and can reach significant numbers of people at little or no additional cost. They can also be used to involve communities or age groups who have not traditionally been consulted. The City of Bologna reported on its longstanding and sustained efforts to build a community online infrastructure so that all residents could be included in the online public sphere. We also heard how young people using social media platforms, such as those offered by TakingITGlobal, can reach large numbers of committed young people across the world and promote active involvement in a range of important social issues such as HIV/AIDS and climate change.

Whilst seeing the potential of these tools, governments and civil society practitioners also advised that they should be used alongside more traditional approaches such as meetings and discussion groups of various kinds to ensure a multi-channel approach and cater for those who prefer face-to-face contact.

#### 5. Using a range of approaches

There is no one approach which fits all countries or the different levels of government within one country. The design of methods of engagement needs to reflect the particular national context and be fit for purpose. It is critical to first identify the purposes of the engagement and the mix of methods that will be appropriate. Public engagement can deliver the greatest value when:

- **Building trust** – When building trust, an ongoing dialogue may be required.
- **Developing visions and plans** – If developing a vision or a plan for an area, a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches e.g. surveys, scenario building, online visioning exercises will be needed.
- **Seeking significant change** – When there is a need to achieve significant change, for example of daily habits (such as for climate change), Austria's approach of dialogue with citizens and experimentation will be useful.

- **Fostering innovation** – Creating regulation-free spaces for service users and communities to develop and try new forms of service delivery, can be important, such as the UK community schools programme,
- **Tackling complex or intractable issues** – Citizens can provide valuable insights and make complicated trade-offs, if there is a process that enables them to work through the issues.

To summarise the recommendations from one workshop session discussing how to engage young people:

It is advised to combine an appropriate mix of methods – traditional and new media and go where the opinions already are. The mix should be based on the topic, the scale of those affected by policy, the type of participation – whether you seek just diagnostics on an issue, or proposals, or in depth decision making.

Another group also advised when it is not appropriate to involve citizens:

If a decision is already taken, if an issue is urgent and there is insufficient time to do it properly; if there are insufficient resources (not just as an excuse) staff or finance; if you can get it done via a questionnaire or survey of satisfaction.

## 6. Evaluation

This is still an area of weakness with few countries reporting systematic evaluation of engagement initiatives. It is particularly important to rise to this challenge of evaluation as it will help solve some of the other challenges such as winning political commitment or obtaining necessary resource allocation. Both AmericaSpeaks and New Zealand's Toi te Taiao Bioethics Council build in evaluation to their public engagement initiatives and it may not be a coincidence that both were characterised by strong strategic planning and being properly funded for the range and types of consultation to be undertaken.

## 7. Inclusion

Inclusion remains as a significant challenge although there are examples of governments who are finding ways of reaching beyond “the usual suspects”. There was much discussion about the importance of reaching young people and many ideas for doing this – although in too many countries there is not yet a planned approach to engagement of young people. We heard about the willingness of youth to be involved and that governments need to change mind sets and to improve their outreach in a way which understands their motivations and the new technology which is now part of their everyday lives. The importance of governments including young people in their ranks as employees and using young people themselves to carry out consultation was also stressed.

Working with a trusted third party such as a civil society organisation can help to reach a wider range of people and participants thought that more could be done to develop the brokering role of civil society organisations, alongside their more traditional roles of public scrutiny, advocacy and service delivery. In New Orleans consultation about re-building after the floods, organised by AmericaSpeaks, involved different ethnic groups and poor people and the the New Zealand's Toi te Taiao Bioethics Council engagement processes included minority communities *e.g.* Māori and Pasifica. This was achieved through targeted recruitment of participants and going to where communities are rather than expecting them to come to you, organising culturally sensitive activities and making sure that some of the staff doing outreach work were themselves from minority groups with appropriate languages.

## Building the future today

This workshop highlighted that progress has been made and that there are many positive and promising initiatives underway in both OECD member countries and non-member countries. However, what now seems to be needed is a strategic shift so that citizen engagement in both policy formulation and implementation and in service design and delivery are mainstreamed. Public engagement needs to become an integral element of how government and public services work, rather than a series of separate or special activities. This requires a new level of professionalism and rigorous evaluation to provide evidence in support of the claims being made by practitioners as to the benefits of citizen engagement.

## Practical steps

From the workshop, a range of practical steps were identified, all of which can support citizen engagement:

- **Ensure policy coherence** – To do this it is important to win political commitment and have a clear strategic direction.
- **Skills for all (civil servants, civil society)** – Capacity building is needed to develop skills of active listening, managing non-linear and iterative processes and being able to identify and use different engagement techniques.
- **Designing decision making processes** – so that they reach different age groups and communities and using existing on line networks.
- **Champions and mentors** – It is important that someone takes responsibility for leading what is in fact a significant organisational change process. Building networks among public servants and identifying experienced mentors can significantly raise capacity.
- **Incentives and catalysts** – To achieve and sustain change requires resources such as seed funding, for events and for awards, to celebrate success and learn from failure
- **Managing risk** – Being willing to take risks is essential for any change and these risks can be managed by creating “safe” learning and innovation spaces and by sharing the up-front costs of new initiatives (*e.g.* between local governments in the same region).
- **Accountability and feedback loops (*e.g.* to political leaders, parliament, public)** – It is critical to develop and use a range of feedback and evaluation tools which enable a speedy initial response to participants and track overall impacts as standard practice.

## Tools

The workshop highlighted the many tools that are being used to support the different building blocks of citizen engagement:

### Public awareness raising:

- Online government information registers.
- Online/offline publicity of participation opportunity (radio, TV, local newspaper).

### Dialogue:

- Deliberative techniques online/offline (*e.g.* deliberative polling).
- 21st Century Town Meetings (*e.g.* AmericaSpeaks) that bring together large numbers of citizens for debate and to establish priorities.
- Using civil society as a bridge and enabler to reach communities or particular groups.

- Participative web (or Web 2.0) platforms and models (e.g. online communities, wikis, blogs, social bookmarking) whose hallmark is that they are networked and interactive.
- Participatory budgeting – To enable citizen to understand public resource allocation and contribute ideas about spending priorities, choices and trade offs.

**Change:**

- Creating/equipping champions in civil society and within government.
- Innovation spaces (e.g. temporal, regulatory, physical) to support experiment and learn more about what works and what doesn't.

**Steering the “system”:**

- Developing the “back office” tools to support participation such as visualisation tools for data mapping and complex decision making in real time and tools for evaluation and reporting.

Participants stressed the importance of using a mix of tools, depending on local context and what governments and civil society are trying to achieve. There was agreement that the overall approach should be a mixture of “hard and soft” combining basic legal frameworks or standards, alongside strategies for “winning hearts and minds” and developing public servants’ commitment and skills which they need to successfully implement change.

## Principles and good practice guidelines

Within this context of diversity, there was support for the development of principles and good practice guidelines at the international level, as a framework that can be adapted according to the needs of different countries, levels of government, sector and organisation.

Participants strongly voiced the need for better mechanisms and networks for the exchange of good practice and learning in public engagement, locally, nationally and internationally. As Irma Mežnarič, the representative of the Ministry of Public Administration of Slovenia, said in the closing session:

“It is impossible to shape the future without citizens. We need to learn from each other and more about how to put theory or commitment into practice.”

The 2008 International Workshop in Ljubljana provided important input into the OECD’s ongoing work on public engagement and the ideas generated will be taken forward into a new phase within and across OECD countries and beyond. It is important to continue to learn across countries. As one participant said, the future is now and governments must engage with citizens to create policies and services fit for the 21st century.

### Notes

1. The OECD Directorate for Public Governance and Territorial Development was responsible for the scientific secretariat for the International Workshop. This summary of the event was drafted by Irene Payne with input from Joanne Caddy and Christian Vergez.
2. For more information on the workshop please see: [www.oecd.org/govt/publicengagement](http://www.oecd.org/govt/publicengagement) To watch the video of the workshop see: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=FI3LSgODqWs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FI3LSgODqWs)





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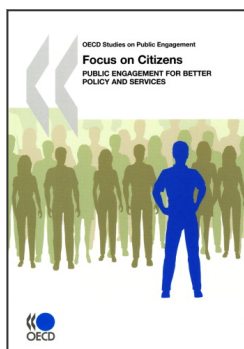
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**From:**  
**Focus on Citizens**  
Public Engagement for Better Policy and Services

**Access the complete publication at:**  
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264048874-en>

**Please cite this chapter as:**

OECD (2009), "Building Citizen-centred Policies and Services: A Global Snapshot", in *Focus on Citizens: Public Engagement for Better Policy and Services*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264048874-37-en>

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